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XI.—THE PROLOGUE OF THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE.¹

I.

Chaucer's prologues and connecting links in the *Canterbury Tales* deserve special study, for they are by far the most characteristic and original part of his writings. When telling his tales he seems to feel himself in a measure bound to reproduce the stories as he finds them. In the general *Prologue*, ll. 731-736, he says :

“Who-so shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce, as ny as ever he can,
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large;
Or elles he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thing, or finde wordes newe.”

And though he may be partly jesting, as he so commonly is, there is more than a grain of truth in what he says. But in the prologues he is under no such compulsion and can give free rein to his fancy. In them, therefore, we find, perhaps more than anywhere else, the true Chaucer, working in his own way, and controlling his sources instead of being partly controlled by them.

Of his prologues three are preëminent in length and originality. These are the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue*, the *Pardoner's Prologue*, and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The two latter are alike in that they are, in a sense, confessions—a popular mediæval type, by the way—and relate personal

¹I need scarcely remark that this paper does not profess to give a systematic account of Chaucer's sources for this *Prologue*, but rather to call attention to some matters that have, perhaps, not been sufficiently emphasized.

experiences. In effect, then, these two prologues are tales,¹ in which the narrator plays a leading part.

Of all the prologues the most notable for wit and originality is the *Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale*. Nothing exactly like it had been seen before in English literature, and nothing exactly like it has been seen since. Of course the modernizations do not count. It contains (inclusive of the words between the Summoner and the Friar) 856 lines, or only four less than the general *Prologue* itself. Chaucer half apologizes for the length of it by making the Friar say, l. 831 :

“This is a long preamble of a tale.”

Yet, despite the length, there is no waste material in it. Nothing clogs the movement, but every word adds its own touch to the whole effect. It is safe to say that Chaucer wrote nothing with more zest than this *Prologue*. Twice he refers to the Wife of Bath in other poems—the *Merchant's Tale*, l. 441, and *Envoy de Chaucer a Bukton*, l. 29. In the *Prologue of the Legend of Good Women*, A. 280–284, he mentions several of the authors afterwards directly used in the composition of this *Prologue*. With no great exaggeration we may say, then, that Chaucer had been all his life unconsciously preparing the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, and when he did set it down in writing he gave it a freshness and spontaneity equalled in few of his other poems. In it he shows how far he has moved away from the spirit of the earlier part of the *Roman de la Rose*, with its attenuated sentimentality and over-wrought allegory, and how thoroughly he has absorbed the spirit of the later part of the *Roman de la Rose*,—the part added by Jean de Meung. Chaucer can still be delicate and pathetic, but there is no false note in his sentiment. His work is no longer merely imitative and conventional; but creative and realistic: it is an early account of the taming of a shrew.

¹ The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is also a confession—the only one of the *Tales* proper that falls into this form.

II.

The women of Chaucer's earlier poems, with the single exception of Criseyde, are such as meet us in the French romances, in saints' lives, in stained glass windows. They are pale, bloodless shadows when put beside the Wife of Bath. They have too often that flawless perfection which is only too seldom attained in this earthly life. Chaucer certainly never saw one of them. The Wife of Bath brought him back to earth, for she was of the earth earthy, and she was proud of it.

Of all Chaucer's characters she is one of the freshest and breeziest, and she has all the brazen assurance of an untamed shrew. In fact, there is no better portrait of a woman who finds fault for the mere fun of it. She is the Mrs. Caudle of the fourteenth century, or, as some one suggests, she is a Falstaff in petticoats. Perhaps even truer would it be to say that she is Mrs. Caudle and Falstaff in one. She is not excessively prudish: no more was Falstaff. She nags her husbands till she becomes their purgatory; and so does Mrs. Caudle. But the Wife of Bath has at once the rollicking humor of Falstaff and the persistent spite of Mrs. Caudle. The Wife of Bath belongs to that noisy group of pilgrims which includes the Summoner, the Reeve, the Miller, and the host Harry Baily, and she can out-talk them all.

"She was som-del deaf, and that was scathe" (*Prol.* 446),

says Chaucer, perhaps hinting that if she could have heard her own tongue she might have been less free of it. Her talk is very loose and coarse, but her gross wit is really an essential part of her character. Take that away, and she would be only a pushing, noisy woman, much like any commonplace shrew. She presents in her *Prologue* a new *Ars Amandi* from her point of view, and in it she recognizes frankly, much too frankly indeed for modern taste, that men and women are human beings and not sublimated shadows

such as we find in the hagiologies. Despite her coarseness she is satisfied with herself and does not care to be apologized for. There are those, she says :

"That wolde live parfitly ;
And lordinges, by your leve, that am not I." (Ll. 111-112.)

She would hardly have understood anything so delicate as the sentiment of the first part of the *Roman de la Rose* ; and in this, I suspect, she is a type of the lower class English woman of her day. But it is to be noted that she glories not merely in the grosser aspects of the married relation, but in the fact that for the majority of her husbands her word was law.¹

III.

Such, then, in briefest outline, are some of the salient characteristics of the Wife of Bath, which I have noted for comparison with material which I am about to introduce. So peculiarly alive is she that she almost seems to be fashioned after a living model, and this may be to some extent true. Yet closer study shows that in this, as in other cases, Chaucer borrowed all the hints he could get, and that, as usual, he turned to the *Roman de la Rose*. In this particular instance his indebtedness to the French poem is, I think, somewhat larger than has been generally recognized. From this work, as everyone knows, he was constantly taking hints for complete poems, for motives and situations, and, without acknowledgment, was transferring, in the good old mediæval fashion, the best lines to his own pages. This fact in general terms is mentioned by all writers on Chaucer, and by Koeppel,² Skeat,³ and Lounsbury,⁴ with specific indication of some passages thus appropriated. Considerable resemblance, then, between the portrait of the Wife of Bath and some portrait

¹ Cf. ll. 219-223.

² *Anglia*, xiv, 238-267.

³ *Works of Chaucer*, Notes, etc, *passim*.

⁴ *Studies in Chaucer*. See Index.

in the *Roman de la Rose* we are not unprepared to find. We are commonly told that the model for this portrait is found in the figure of La Vielle; and in general terms this is true. But along with many resemblances there are many points of difference; and these it may not be superfluous to note, since there is, so far as I am aware, no connected account of them. Chaucer's portrait is by no means a copy, but rather a composite of many elements.

In the first place, we see that the entire setting is different. Just before the fragment of the *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris ends, we find the first mention of La Vielle, a morose old woman who is set by Jalousie to guard the door of the prison where Bel-Acueil is confined. As the Middle English version puts it:

“[Ther] hath ordeyned Ielousye
 An olde vekke, for to espye
 The maner of his governaunce;
 The whiche devel, in hir enfaunce,
 Had lerned [much] of Loves art,
 And of his pleyes took hir part;
 She was [expert] in his servyse.
 She knew ech wrenche and every gyse
 Of love, and every [lovers] wyle,
 It was [the] harder her to gyle.
 Of Bialacoil she took ay hede,
 That ever he liveth in wo and drede.
 He kepte him coy and eek privee,
 Lest in him she hadde see
 Any folly countenaunce,
 For she knew al the olde daunce.”¹

A little more than a hundred lines further on the work of Guillaume de Lorris ends and that of Jean de Meung begins. But the essential outlines of the portrait are already sketched, and will in due time be filled in by the later poet in great detail. For thousands of lines, however, Jean de Meung (except for a passing reference, l. 4718) runs on as though he

¹ *Romaunt of the Rose*, 4285-4300 (Skeat).

Roman de la Rose, 4529-4545 (Michel).

did not know of her existence. In fact, in the rather loose frame-work of the second part of the *Roman de la Rose*, she could remain indefinitely with nothing to do while the dissertations on every imaginable topic drag their slow length along. On one occasion, indeed, when there is a possible danger that Bel-Acueil may be freed, she makes a great outcry (*Rom. de la R.*, 8026, Michel). A little later (8150) the Friend warns the Lover that he must watch her, for she is against him :

"La vielle qui Bel-Acuel garde
Servés ausinc: que mal feu larde!"

But for several thousand lines more she is not mentioned again, and then only in a word (11,492) when the barons of the host are proposing to storm the castle and free Bel-Acueil. At length, however, Male-Bouche, the ever-active enemy of women, has his tongue cut out by Faulx-Semblant (13,300), who with a few companions enters the castle where La Vielle is. They flatter her outrageously and ask her to let Bel-Acueil descend from the tower for a chat with them. When her natural fears are quieted she releases Bel-Acueil and bestows upon him the garland that the Lover has sent. After some hesitation he accepts it, and she then relates to him the story of her life (13,681 seq.).

She is a worn-out old woman,¹ she says,

"Mon tens jolis est tous alés. (13,683.)

¹A similar sentiment is expressed in Béranger's poem, *Ma Grand' Mère*, to which Mr. S. Friedewald has kindly called my attention:

"Ma grand' mère, un soir à sa fête,
De vin pur ayant bu deux doigts,
Nous disait en branlant la tête:
Que d'amoureux j'eus autrefois!
Combien je regrette
Mon bras si dodu
Ma jambe bien faite,
Et le temps perdu!"

} (bis.)

She will soon need a staff or crutch. Her lost beauty she regrets, and yet she recalls how her lovers used to flock about her, and how they would fight with each other outside her doors. But in those days she was only a young fool and knew nothing of love. Since then she has grown wise through experience (13,745), and this she is ready to share with Bel-Acuil. She would even yet like to get even with some men who treated her ill; but in spite of all she is thrilled when she recalls the gay life she used to lead (13,877), and the thought of it makes her young once more. She wanders on with her tale, tells of Love's laws, of his bow and arrows, and of worthy and unworthy women—Dido, Phillis, Helen, Medea. She shows how women should beautify themselves, how they should dress so as to cover defects, how they should have tears ready for instant use, how they should behave at table,¹ what arts they should employ to catch men. All men are false, and women should therefore be free to bestow themselves whenever and wherever they please. All this and more La Vielle expounds at great length. She might now be rich, she says, but she finally lost her heart to a ribald who cared nothing for her and who beat her (15,423), as the Wife of Bath's fifth husband beat her. The old woman's story ends at l. 15,492. What little she has to do and say after this point is of no importance for our inquiry.

Evidently, then, although Chaucer did not attempt to copy the portrait of La Vielle as a whole, he took from her the general suggestion for the outlines of the Wife of Bath. But he modified the figure of La Vielle by making her younger and more vigorous, by giving her as keen an interest in life as she had ever had, by representing her as still ready for

¹Some of the best touches in Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress are taken from this passage. Cf. *Rom. de la R.* (Michel), 14325-14373, and *Prol.* 127-135. Tyrwhitt noted the resemblance between these two passages.

matrimony whenever opportunity should offer.¹ Furthermore, Chaucer transformed the somewhat morose and broken-spirited old woman, entirely out of sympathy with life, into a witty and frisky shrew—good-natured in a way, but still a shrew. Where did Chaucer pick up the hint for that? Or, rather, could he have got any hint for the special part he makes her play?

The shrew is no novelty in life or literature, as even Solomon and Socrates can testify; and some people, who read Chaucer's poetry as if it were a series of legal documents, think that he could have got abundant suggestion at home. They can cite, too, from his poems a few passages of a suspicious color. The further fact remains that in Chaucer's verse we find one of the earliest attempts in an English poem to utilize the shrew for literary purposes—other early references to shrews are merely incidental—and certainly the very earliest attempt to depict such a type as the Wife of Bath.

A partial explanation of the presence of a shrew among the Canterbury pilgrims, with her exposition of how wedlock may be made unendurable, is perhaps found in the fact that Chaucer may have felt in a sense compelled by the laws of artistic balance to introduce something as a foil to the long-suffering wives in the other stories on matrimony,² and hence to represent some woman as a scold. The Man of Law has told his tale of the woes of Constance. Chaucer himself has told of the patience of Prudence, the wife of Melibeus. Harry Baily wishes that his wife were of the same meek type. The Clerk of Oxford is shortly to tell of the patient

¹ "Blessed be god that I have wedded fyve!
Welcome the sixte, whan that ever he shal."

(*Prol.* 44-45.)

This sentiment is apparently not in perfect accord with that of lines 474, 475, but there is no real contradiction.

² The glaring contrast between the asceticism advocated in the *Person's Tale* and the license of this Prologue is sufficiently evident.

Grisildis. Bearing all this misery in mind we find new significance in the Wife of Bath's opening words:

Experience
 were right ynough to me
 To speke of wo that is in mariage. (Prol. 1-3.)

She knew well what that woe meant, for she had helped make it.

The evils of matrimony were, of course, a favorite theme in the Middle Ages from patristic times down. Most of the clerical diatribes against women were seriously meant and were ill-natured in the last degree.¹ The celibate clergy still had a score to settle with Eve for her indiscretion in the Garden, and they tried to balance the account by abusing her daughters.² The unfortunate fact that some women were not invulnerable to attack gave point to satire that nevertheless gradually became, for the most part, conventional.

Now no one, I think, can feel that Chaucer was paying off a malicious grudge? He was a humorist, and in this Prologue he took the course natural to a humorist who undertakes to handle the theme there discussed. A serious account of the miseries of wedlock yields us Constance and Grisildis, and depths of woe.

In the Middle Ages women were in theory legally inferior to men, and they were expected to know their place and keep

¹ Even in works not ill-disposed the clerical bias appears in such passing remarks as the following:

"Because she (Eve) sinned in pride, he meeked her, saying: Thou shalt be under the power of man, and he shall have lordship over thee, and he shall put thee to affliction. Now is she subject to a man by condition and dread, which before was but subject by love."—Caxton's *Golden Legend* (*Hist. of Adam*) (Ellis), I, p. 175. Cf. also *Ancren Riwle* (ed. Morton), pp. 51-54.

²The Wife of Bath herself calls attention to this fact:

"For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
 That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
 But-if it be of holy seyntes lyves." (688-690.)

it. But nature is now and then too strong for theory ; and a great bluff fellow like Harry Baily, who is afraid of nobody else, visibly pales before his partner, who too evidently leads the strenuous life. Chaucer could readily see the artistic opportunity afforded by reversing the normal order and making the woman the ruler at a time when her inferiority was taken for granted. To this day, though the motive has been employed times without number, one can still raise a laugh with a modern instance.

The general considerations already adduced are perhaps sufficient to acquit Chaucer of any very savage purpose in his occasional thrusts at women and the difficulty of getting on with them. But his well-known apology in the *Prologue of the Legend of Good Women*, l. 340 seq., makes the whole matter plain. In his earlier writings, he had followed the current hostile criticism made popular by the *Roman de la Rose*, but in so doing he had been merely practicing an academic exercise, just as a modern college student might debate against the side he really believed in. Time-honored custom has sanctioned in our own day a host of somewhat inane jests against one's mother-in-law ; and the conventional fourteenth century satire against women seems in many cases to have meant little more.

So much, then, for mediæval shrews in general : now for the particular shrew of this Prologue. Have we any clue as to her origin ? I incline to think we have. No one doubts that Chaucer was able to invent such a character without help, yet when we remember that he had the entire *Roman de la Rose* at his finger-tips, when we see how often and how unexpectedly he turned to it even for single phrases that he was perfectly capable of inventing for himself,¹ we

¹ I venture to call attention to a passage hitherto, I think, unnoticed.

One can hardly doubt that in writing the passage beginning at l. 534, where he tells of the eagerness of the Wife of Bath to share with her friends her husband's secret confidences, Chaucer had in mind the long

may, I think, hold that likeness of situation is a strong presumption in favor of the hypothesis of borrowing, and we may, at least, raise the question whether Chaucer might not have taken from the French poem the hint for the type of scolding that the Wife of Bath so delights in.

Now, in the *Roman de la Rose*, beginning at l. 9204 (Michel), is a long passage paralleling in a rather remarkable way the scolding in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. In this passage we find an account of a jealous husband, who, like the Wife of Bath, has much to say of the woes of matrimony, and who, like her, speaks from experience. He takes much the same attitude toward his wife that the Wife of Bath adopts toward her husbands, though his temper is more savage than hers. There is the same suspicious questioning, the same unreasonable refusal to listen to an explanation.¹

passage in the *Roman de la Rose*, where the process of wheedling secrets out of the husband is described in detail:

“ Et quiconques dit à sa fame
 Ses secrez, il en fait sa dame.
 Nus homs qui soit de mère nés,
 S'il n'est yvres ou forsenés,
 Ne doit à fame révéler
 Nule riens qui face à céler,
 Se d'autrui ne le vuet oïr.
 Miex vaudroit du pais foïr,
 Que dire à fame chose à taire,
 Tant soit loial ne débonaire;
 Ne jà nul fait secré ne face,
 S'il voit fame venir en place:
 Car s'il i a péril de cors,
 El le dira, bien le recors,
 Combien que longement atende;
 Et se nus riens ne l'en demande,
 Le dira-ele vraiment,
 Sens estrange amonestement.” (17,284-17,301.)

The theme is continued, with illustrations, to l. 17,643.

Other cases are cited by Koeppel and Skeat.

¹ For convenience in making comparisons I cite some of the more important passages from the *Roman de la Rose* (Michel), but these should be studied in their original setting:

Most important to note is that in this long tirade Jean de Meung makes use (ll. 9310 seq.) of the fragment of the *Aureolus*

9276. " Comment le Jaloux si repret
 Sa femme, et dit que trop mesprent
 De démener ou joie ou feste,
 Et que de ce trop le mole te.

D'autre part n'el puis plus celer,
 Entre vous et ce bacheler
 Robichonet au vert chapel,
 Qui si tost vient a vostre apel,
 Avés-vous terres à partir ?
 Vous ne poés de li partir.

9310. Ha ! se Theophrates créusse,
 J'à fame espousée n'ésusse ;
 Il ne tient pas hom por sage
 Qui fame prent par mariage,
 Soit bele, ou lede, ou povre, ou riche :
 Car il dit, et por voir l'afiche,
 En son noble livre Auréole,
 Qui bien fait à lire en escole,
 Qu'il i a vie trop grevaine,
 Plaine de travail et de paine,
 Et de contens et de riotes,
 Par les orguelz des fames sotes,
 Et de dangiers et de reprouches
 Que font et dient par lor bouches,
 Et de requestes et de plaintes
 Que truevent par ochoisons maintes :
 Si r'a grant paine en eus garder,
 Por lor fox voloirs retarder.
 Et qui vuet povre fame prendre,
 A norrir la l'estuet entendre,
 E à vestir et a chaucier ;
 Et se tant se cuide essaucier
 Qu'il la prengne riche forment,
 A soffrir la a grant torment ;
 Tant la trueve orgueilleuse et fiere,
 Et sorcuidée et bobancièrre,
 Que son mari ne prisera
 Riens, et par tout desprisera
 Ses parens et tout son lignage,
 Par son outrecuidé langage.

Liber De Nuptiis of Theophrastus, which is preserved in the first book of St. Jerome's *Epistola Adversus Iovinianum*.

S'ele est bele, tuit i aqueurent,
 Tuit la porsivent, tout l'eneurent,
 Tuit i hurtent, tuit i travaillent,
 Tuit i luitent, tuit i bataillent,
 Tuit à li servir s'estudient,
 Tuit li vont entor, tuit la prient,
 Tuit i musent, tuit la convoitent,
 Si l'ont en la fin, tant exploitent :
 Car tor de toutes pars assise
 Envis eschape d'estre prise.

S'el r'est lede, el vuet à tous plaire ;
 Et comment, porroit nus ce faire
 Qu'il gart chose que tuit guerroient,
 Ou qui vuet tous ceus qui la voient ?
 S'il prent à tout le monde guerre,
 Il n'a pooir de vivre en terre ;
 Nus n'es garderoit d'estre prises
 Por tant qu'el fussent bien requises.

9416. Et cil qui font les mariages,
 Si ont trop merveilleus usages,
 Et coustume si despareille,
 Qu'il me vient à trop grant merveille.
 Ne sai dont vient ceste folie,
 Fors de rage et de desverie.
 Je voi que qui cheval achete,
 N'iert jà si fox que riens i mete,
 Comment que l'en l'ait bien couvert,
 Se tout n'el voit à descouvert.
 Par tout le regarde et descuevre ;
 Mès la fame si bien se cuevre,
 Ne jà n'i sera descouverte,
 Ne por gaaigne, ne por perte,
 Ne por solas, ne por mésèse,
 Por ce, sans plus, qu'el ne desplèse
 Devant qu'ele soit espousée ;
 Et quant el voit la chose outrée,
 Lors primes monstre sa malice,
 Lors pert s'ele a en li nul vice ;
 Lors fait au fol ses meurs sentir,
 Que riens n'i vaut le repentir.
 Si sai-ge bien certainement,

Chaucer, as has been shown in detail by Woolfcombe,¹ though without mention of the *Roman de la Rose*, used Jerome's Epistle and this fragment of Theophrastus, translating the Latin almost literally. Jerome's treatise Chaucer had read rather early, for he mentions it in the *Prologue of the Legend of Good Women*, l. 281, and he uses it in several of his poems. But I suspect that Chaucer's first acquaintance with the railing accusations that Theophrastus brings against women he got from the book on which he modeled so much of his earliest work—the *Roman de la Rose*. At all events, we find that though Chaucer almost literally translates Jerome, he had the *Roman de la Rose* under his hand at the same time, for he now and then enlarges upon the original in precisely the same way that Jean de Meung does in handling the same material.² Koepfel points out³ two striking instances, but

Combien qu'el se maint sagement,
N'est nus qui marié se sente,
S'il n'est fox, qui ne s'en repente."

There are of course other passages of the *Roman de la Rose* (duly cited by Skeat and Koepfel) that were used by Chaucer in this Prologue, but for my present purpose they need not be specified.

¹ *Essays on Chaucer*, pp. 295–306 (Chaucer Society).

² The original passage from *Theophrastus*, though it is packed with bitter charges against women, contains no such *scolding* as fills the greater part of ll. 245–378 in the Prologue, and is the burden of the tirade in the *Roman de la Rose*, but contains only the following complaints which reappear in part in the Prologue, 235 seq.:—

"Deinde per noctes totas garrulae conquestiones: Illa ornatio procedit in publicum: haec honoratur ab omnibus, ego in conuentu foeminarum misella despicio. Cur aspicias uicinam? Quid cum ancillula loqueris? De foro ueniens quid attulisti? Non amicum habere possumus, non sodalem. Alterius amorem suum odium suspicatur. Si doctissimus praeceptor in qualibet urbium fuerit, nec uxorem relinquere, nec cum sarcina ire possumus. Pauperem alere difficile est, diuitem ferre tormentum."—*S. Hieron. Opera Omnia*, II, 37 (Frankfort, 1684).

Here we have suggestions for curtain-lectures, but not precisely of the type that the Wife of Bath affects. She throws back at her husband the things that he has said to her—if she may be believed.

³ *Anglia*, XIV, 254–255.

without any comment whatever upon the situation in which they are used, and hence without drawing the conclusion which I think naturally follows from a comparison of the scolding in the *Prologue*¹ with the long passage that tells of the Jealous Husband. Of course the resemblance does not apply to details beyond a certain point, for the Jealous Husband wanders off to discuss a variety of matters of which Chaucer can make no use. The general situation is what seems to have attracted Chaucer; and when he has once grasped the suggestion he enlarges upon it in characteristic fashion. Hence we may freely admit that he largely translates Jerome (or Theophrastus) in this passage, and yet hold that he borrowed the hint for the setting from the *Roman de la Rose*.²

Chaucer transfers some of the material in this tirade to his own verse with little modification, and he can hardly have avoided seeing how much more effective for his purpose the practical exemplification of the disagreeable sides of matrimony would be if the original setting were changed. To do this he needed only to reverse the conditions, to turn the scolding husband into the scolding wife, and to make the Wife of Bath quote the angry words of the Jealous Husband to his wife as words that her husband said to her. The difference is that the shoe is on the other foot: the wife is her husband's purgatory.³ Such a reversal of the situation

¹ Particularly lines 235-378.

² Note in particular the spiteful repetition of "Thou seist" (entirely lacking in *Theophrastus*), by which she makes out her husband to be a male shrew, as the husband really is in the *Roman de la Rose*. This is a very neat device of Chaucer's; for she dextrously puts her husband in the wrong, and pretends that he is (or has been) scolding *her*.

³ Cf. l. 489. The conception of wedlock as a purgatorial state was not invented by Chaucer, as the following lines show:

"Quid dicam breuiter esse coniugium?
certe uel tartara, uel purgatorium.
Non est in tartara quies aut otium
nec dolor coniugis habet remedium."

Goliard de Coniuge non Ducenda, 197-200.

would strongly appeal to Chaucer's peculiar type of humor and be in entire keeping with his practice on other occasions. As is well known, he turns the illustrations borrowed from holy Jerome's impassioned plea for virginity to a use the saint could never have dreamed of. Other instances will occur to every student of Chaucer.¹

It is worth noting, too, that Chaucer makes the Wife of Bath glory in doing the very things that the Jealous Husband charges upon his wife. The French poet merely represents the husband as saying outrageous things to his innocent wife. Chaucer represents the Wife of Bath as saying things equally outrageous and baseless to her husbands, while she gleefully admits to the listening pilgrims that she put no restrictions upon herself. With an air of triumph she confesses that some of the coarsest of the current mediæval charges against women—such for instance as we find in the Latin poem *Goliath de Coniuge non Ducenda*, 149–164, the lines are not quotable—are a part of her creed and practice.² Chaucer makes her more than bear out the truth of the spiteful lines in the same poem :

“Est lingua gladius in ore feminæ,
qua vir percutitur tanquam a fulmine.
per hanc hilaritas fugit ab homine,
domus subvertitur australi turbine.” (165–168.)

Says she,

“They were ful glad whan I spak to hem fayre,
For god it wot, I chidde hem spitously.” (Prol. 222–223.)

“Stiborn I was as is a leonesse,
And of my tonge a verray Iangleresse.” (637–638.)

Chaucer is apparently more good-natured in his general attitude toward women than Jean de Meung, and with

¹ Cf. *Gen. Prol.*, 179–181, and Skeat's note showing that Chaucer has reversed the meaning of the original; also, *Nonne Preestes Tale*, B. 4353–4356, etc.

² Note especially *Prol.*, 615–626.

characteristic skill he avoids saying anything directly against them. Yet he really hits a much harder indirect blow by letting a typical shrew expose by a process of minute self-revelation all the weakness of her sex.

In this portrait and in this *Prologue* Chaucer attained the perfection of his art, and he immeasurably improved the materials that he borrowed. Whether his work is altogether to be commended on other grounds is a question upon which I do not now enter.

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